

TRANSACTIONS

OF THE

Philosophical Society of Victoria.

*Inaugural Address of the President, Captain Clarke, R.E.,
Surveyor-General, &c., &c.*

IN accepting the office of your President, in now assuming the task of, for the first time, addressing your Association when launched on its course, I have been, not regardless of the responsibility I have taken upon myself, nor have I forgotten the absence of so many of those essential qualifications which would have rendered your selection less embarrassing to myself, or my address to you more worthy of the Society we seek to establish.

Not alone in the offshoots of the older world, but in the more ancient seats of learning, positions of this nature have customarily been occupied by men distinguished for their rank

or eminent for their learning, and it would therefore have been most difficult for me to reconcile to myself my occupation of this place had I not felt assured of your recognition in me of those more humble, but perhaps not less useful qualities which may aid our common object, but in the language of one who had far less reason for using it under circumstances not unlike the present. I repeat that "in zeal for the welfare of this Association, in intense interest for the accomplishment of its object, I yield to none, and if these may suffice, I hope I shall not be found unworthy of the trust you repose in me." Yet it is no common responsibility with which you have charged me, for this Association is one of the great powers which the altering phases of this world have called into action; yet a few years since and it could not have existed; and even now some persons are found unable to appreciate its worth or understand its purpose.

And now may I be permitted to urge the necessity of that mutual support and co-operation upon which the progress and ultimate success of the Society is entirely based. From as simple an origin have the noblest institutions of our parent lands had birth, where their founders, however few their numbers, have shown that earnest perseverance which is the sure index of success; nor need we doubt our success in securing the same issue, for whilst every other interest is progressing with no ordinary rapidity, we may rest assured that the facilities for experiment and observation will become daily more attainable.

If we look back upon the early history of the human family, when the arts of husbandry reigned alternately with those of warfare; and if we compare the comforts of life, and the means of intellectual enjoyment in those ages, with those of the present day, we shall perceive how vain it would be to attempt to measure the advantages which have resulted from the pursuit of knowledge and the study of the natural sciences.

An enumeration of the items which supply our daily wants, and minister to our enjoyments, would at once show that the advantage which we thus possess, surround us so closely on every side, that, like the air we breathe, we direct to them the less attention on account of their invariable presence.

When we further note the amount of discovery and improvement which each age in the history of man has contributed, it becomes apparent that the progress has partaken less of an arithmetical than a geometrical proportion. Each discovery has opened a wider field for new discoveries; improvement in one branch of knowledge has lent assistance to the development of every other, until the amelioration of the conditions of life, and the facilities of action have become such as to react, in no common degree, upon the available power of a single life devoted to the pursuit of truth.

Thus while a knowledge of the nature and origin of disease has afforded the means of prolonging the average duration of life, the appliances of locomotive printing and other machinery have made that life of thrice its former duration, measuring it by the scale of the number of events for which it is available.

But these extensive advances by no means show reason for relaxing our efforts, for while we are daily encouraged by important discoveries and a nearer approach to long desired truths, we are at the same time obtaining sight of a more widely extended horizon.

With this stimulus to our efforts and mindful of the duty incurred by the acceptance of these bequests of exclusive knowledge, we must each endeavour to add his tribute to the common store.

Reflecting that Australia is destined to fill no unimportant part in the common history of a more advanced civilisation, and remembering that Victoria in material wealth has made a century's advance in the span of time which has elapsed since her foundation; with this progress, the result of one discovery, are we to rest content? Should we not

rather question the continuance of this prosperity, recognising in it the means to a more desirable and higher end.

The disturbances which we have experienced with our acquisition make room for the foundation of a future social greatness.

Admitting this position, how can we advance this end? The difficulties of experiment in a new country will, doubtless, give additional importance to the culture of correct and minute observation. Who can predict the result which will arise from the simplest discoveries? A stain upon a stone, a drop of coloured water, may prove of sufficient significance to fill the mountain's solitudes with the iron life of machinery. Let us prove, rather than assert, the utility of research. Let us enforce a due recognition of the labour of the inventor and discoverer until his national importance be acknowledged.

And while thus in a general view, we cannot fail to see the value of those pursuits, how much more do they force themselves upon our observation when we scan them in detail.

The objects of our Institution will not be answered unless the geologist, the chemist, and the representative of the associated sciences conjointly labour to produce those results which have justly become the pride and glory of the civilised world.

The mere mechanical arts are but the secondary results of science, and as accumulating facts, though necessarily laborious, are the first step towards eliminating truth; let us therefore sturdily arm ourselves to the acquisition of them, forgetting even what has been termed the sublimity of deductive philosophy, in the less honourable, but no less arduous and valuable, efforts of the practical experimentalist.

Such labours, ever pursued under difficulties, seldom rewarded commensurately with their importance, it shall be our duty and our interest to facilitate; and while thus striving for these ends let us endeavour to secure, by singleness of purpose and unity of action, the general sympathy.